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Widening Access to Higher Education for Students from Economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds: What works and why?

Edward M. Sosu, Lauren N. Smith, Stephanie McKendry, Ninetta Santoro and Sue Ellis
University of Strathclyde
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There are significant social inequalities in access to higher education internationally. Students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds remain persistently under-represented in higher education (HE). Put simply, university populations fail to reflect their broader societies, with the vast majority of entrants coming from more advantaged backgrounds.

In Scotland:

- Pupils from the most disadvantaged households are less likely to enter higher education, and when they do, they are more likely to go to college, rather than university;
- Pupils from the most affluent areas, on average, are three times more likely to directly enrol from school to HE (61%) than their peers living in the most economically disadvantaged areas (18%).

Evidence suggests that life chances in terms of labour market success as well as social, emotional and health outcomes are closely related to the level of education achieved. Although estimates vary, there is no doubt that, in general, the higher the qualifications obtained by individuals, the greater the financial benefits and improved socioeconomic standing. Differences in earnings associated with a higher education qualification contribute to a cycle of income inequality, and HE systems can function as both engines of social mobility and inequality in a 'merit' based society.

Policy responses and the contribution of our research

Widening access to higher education is a broad issue that includes equity of access, retention and progression, as well as labour market success. Over the last two decades, the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council, universities, colleges and several charities have been working to tackle the educational access gap in Scotland. Key policies and programmes include free tuition, outreach programmes, contextual admissions, ring-fenced university places, scholarships, agreements between the funding council and universities and many others. Most recently, the government set up a Commission on Widening Access and its recommendations were published in March 2016.

Our research contributes to the ongoing effort by systematically examining the evidence for policy and programme interventions that widen access to higher education. We also examined trends in widening access in Scotland, barriers to access, and the impact of the national outreach scheme, the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP), in supporting students to overcome these barriers. We provide recommendations for different stakeholders.

The most effective widening access interventions

Evidence from the systematic review indicates that **grants and scholarships are a necessary condition for widening access** for those from low income households, and essential for increasing access to high status institutions. Enhancing the affordability of higher education through direct financial support that reduces the burden on disadvantaged individuals is an essential condition for widening access.

Overall, **guidance and outreach are important vehicles for improving access to HE**. When counselling and guidance support is provided to students who are unfamiliar with the application process, they are more likely to successfully apply to higher education. Individuals who benefit most from outreach interventions are those who were not previously considering higher education and therefore may not be selected for inclusion in targeted schemes. With respect to access to high status institutions, provision of outreach and guidance alone may not be sufficient to widening access.

Contextual admissions may contribute to widening access, but our evidence was inconclusive. Attribute-based admission criteria that do not take into account socioeconomic factors that may influence the acquisition of said attributes are unlikely to be successful.

Trends in widening access in Scotland

- Schools with historically low HE progression rates (HE PR) recorded significantly higher progression to HE (college and university) over the three years examined (2011 to 2013);
- Trends between the different types of schools suggests a 7.1% growth in HE PR in low progression schools compared to 0.83% in medium to high progression ones;
- **There is still significant inequality in access to HE**. Across all the time points examined, schools with large concentrations of students from the lowest deprivation quintile recorded significantly lower numbers of students going to HE;
- A small number of schools have **persistently low HE progression** over the period examined. These schools appear to have significant underlying difficulties associated with deprivation;
- The significant increases observed in HE PR for students attending low progression schools coincided with a **1% growth in HE places** over the period, **mandating of higher education institutions to widen access**, and **funding of additional HE places** specifically for young people from low income backgrounds.
- A limitation of these findings is the use of school level data, which does not tell us the characteristics of the pupils making progress in low progression schools. Additionally, recent studies and data defining access to HE as enrolment to university suggest a decline in access for students from low income backgrounds.

Barriers to access to higher education

Several factors hinder access to HE for students from low income households in Scotland. These include:

- Low academic attainment;
- Grade-based admissions;
- Requirements for personal statements and interviews;
- The cost of going to university;
- Concerns about the perceived costs of university and the burden of debt;
- Family and teacher knowledge and understanding of HE;
- Confidence levels and fears of 'not fitting in';
- Subject choices made at school.

How SHEP support young people to overcome barriers to HE

SHEP, a national outreach programme, undertakes a range of activities to alleviate some of the effects of the barriers to access. Our study examined these activities and their impact on access as reported by pupils, students and teachers:

SHEP Activities	Reported Impact of SHEP Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Giving one-to-one guidance to pupils connected to their aims and goals• Giving information about HE options to pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increasing awareness of programme options• Supporting informed choices• Increasing awareness of college and supporting students to transition to university
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Giving one-to-one application support to pupils to construct personal statements• Providing alternative qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improving personal statements and applications• Compensating for lower grades with alternative qualifications
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advocacy through making enquiries and negotiating with admissions departments on behalf of students• Improving students' interview skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Securing admission for students
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Providing information about student finance and loans	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increasing understanding of the student funding system
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helping teachers understand admissions process	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increasing teacher knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Giving study skills advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Motivating and enabling pupils to achieve
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using student volunteers to give relevant, peer-led guidance• Inviting university admissions staff to talk in schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing confidence and familiarity around HE

SHEP, like other outreach programmes and interventions, cannot be the sole vehicle for widening access. However, our evidence suggests that outreach programmes *can* help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to take advantage of other opportunities.

Recommendations

Below we include recommendations for different stakeholders on what can be done to increase access to HE for students from low income households.

	SG	SFC	Local authorities	Universities	Colleges	Schools	SHEP	Other outreach	Researchers
Increase ring-fenced university places to achieve long-term goals of equity of access.	✓	✓							
Encourage HEIs to increase access to school leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds for sustainable improvement.	✓	✓		✓					
Address the attainment gap, which is one of the most significant barriers to access.	✓		✓			✓			✓
Increase scholarships and grants for young people from low income households. Funding is a necessary consideration for those from low income households.	✓								
Improve articulation to support a smooth transition from college to university.	✓	✓		✓	✓				
Provide school-wide <i>and</i> targeted outreach. Outreach schemes may act as a motivator for attainment and development of aspirational post-school plans for all pupils.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Teachers play a key role in pupils' decision-making. Improve teacher knowledge of HE.			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Ensure guidance is impartial so young people can make optimum choices based on their own interests.				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Streamline the widening access landscape to derive the optimum benefit and efficiency from widening access outreach programmes.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Further research on trends in progression, impact of outreach schemes, participant characteristics, the attainment gap, the use of articulation and contextual offers and the equality of graduate outcomes for college and university HE routes.	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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